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Partnerships in Employment Transition Systems Change Technical Assistance Center

Testimony to the Advisory Committee in Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities

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We represent the Partnerships in Employment Transition Systems Change Technical Assistance Center. The Center is a 5-year projected funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and is directed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston in partnership with the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services. Eight states are funded to determine needed policy and practice changes that will increase post-secondary education and competitive employment for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Partnerships states are: Alaska, California, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Tennessee and Wisconsin. The lead agency for the project was required to be a member of the network of projects supported by the Developmental Disabilities Act, such as the state DD Council, the Protection and Advocacy Agency or the UCEDD.

A mandatory element of each project is a Consortium consisting of representatives from key state agencies including the Departments of Developmental Disabilities, Education and Vocational Rehabilitation, individuals with IDD, family members, teachers, and businesses. The key agency partners established commitment to the project's outcomes in a memorandum of understanding submitted with the application. These consortia help project staff create a strategic vision for systems change, monitor performance, disseminate results and serve as champions for change within their respective agencies and networks.

The Higher Performing States Framework for IDD services guides us in our technical assistance work. The Framework was developed from ICI's systems change research spanning over 27 years. To accomplish and sustain substantive policy and practice change, a holistic approach is required. Our research identified 7 elements as drivers of change: leadership, interagency collaboration, strategic goals and operating policies, financing and contracting, performance measurement, training and technical assistance, and service innovation.

We are now into the fifth year of the Partnerships project. A variety of data sources such as the external evaluation study conducted by the Lewin Group, internal data collected by the projects themselves and observations from our technical assistance site visits and telephone consultation reinforce the importance of following the Framework for transition systems change. However, for the states that are realizing the greatest change, 3 elements stand out to us as being most important: leadership investments, interagency collaboration and performance measurement.

Leadership

The strongest performers in the Partnerships network are states that have **leaders** who carry the mission, are adept at policy development, seize opportunities presented by federal policies such as the CMS ruling and WIOA, and can communicate to others the necessity for changing practices. We have learned that leadership is an indispensable element for provoking and sustaining state systems change. Partnerships leaders are located in a variety of settings and do not necessarily carry the title of Director of a state agency or community-based organization. For example, the Missouri DD agency has a Director of Employment and Training and regional employment staff reporting to him. He not only works within his agency to carry out policies but also works across state agencies and with other employment stakeholders to advance intra agency systems change. In California, a DD agency staff member has been instrumental in the development of California's dashboard which is a user-friendly display of VR, DD and Education data and which explains the performance of these agencies regarding competitive employment. While she is not a senior staff at the agency, she is a highly valuable member of California's consortium and is actively engaged in meetings, work groups, and leadership strategy sessions. In Wisconsin, the project's staff work is interwoven with an advocacy coalition that is highly adept and creative in developing policy recommendations in response to systemic challenges and weaknesses. Coalition members have fostered working relationships with legislators of both parties and federal and state agency leaders, which have stimulated both policy development and implementation. At a state agency level the consistent marker is a meaningful investment in personnel who are accountable for improving employment policy, practice, and outcomes, and who are not distracted by other responsibilities in pursuing those goals.

Interagency Collaboration

Although having a Consortium to guide the projects was a grant requirement, it is how the projects have designed and are using the Consortium, which is noteworthy. Usually systems change initiatives are led by a single entity that works with one or two other entities to bring about change. The Partnerships design differs and this may be a key reason for the successful outcomes. The Consortium's purpose is to represent the key stakeholders in the state. The state Partnerships' project staff facilitates the Consortia's work and together these entities function as a neutral force whose primary purpose is to increase competitive employment for youth with IDD. Frequent meetings have allowed individuals to get to know their counterparts across the state, learn more about how they function, and build interpersonal relationships. While this is the softer side of systems change, we find it especially important. States are being buffeted by changing legislation, regulations and funding shortfalls. Trying to move one system is difficult enough but the complexities of having 3 or more systems trying to do this in tandem takes a herculean effort. The collaborative feature of Partnerships has made it easier for the consortium members to debate the hard issues such as money, turf, and compliance. Conflict is viewed as a natural part of the change process. The Consortium design has encouraged joint ownership of initiatives and commitment to the work. California's Consortium has been instrumental in the development of the California Blueprint which is a policy being implemented across Education, Vocational Rehabilitation and Developmental Disabilities that will map out employment and post secondary strategies in the years to come. Tennessee's project facilitated the development of a Memorandum of Understanding between the 3 agencies. While this process took 3 years, it is an MOU that provides specificity about funding and staffing across the agencies. Once it was completed, additional agencies such as Mental Health and Medicaid joined VR, DD and Education in developing a 2-year strategic work plan with specific timelines and responsibilities spread across all of the participating agencies. New York has used its project platform to convene and facilitate meetings attended by state operating agencies. Consortium members and staff wrote a grant application to the Office of Disability and Employment Policy, which will continue certain aspects of the Partnerships work and expand into other areas such as organizational transformation.

While the Partnerships initiative is the catalyst for change the continuity and sustainability belongs with the state agencies and other key partners such as individuals, families, teachers, and businesses. The Collective Impact Framework (Kania and Kramer, 2011) speaks to the importance of a backbone organization, one that "coordinates the various dimensions and collaborators involved in the initiatives". A supporting backbone is "essential to ensuring that the collective impact maintains momentum and facilitates impact." The backbone organizations in the Partnerships network are the DD network organizations and results speak to the importance of supporting backbone infrastructure in future systems change initiatives.

Performance Measurement

Systems change initiatives focus on policy and strategy, but most state Education and IDD systems do not have access to reliable data on employment outcomes to support goals and strategic planning. Competitive integrated employment outcomes have been stagnant over the past several years. The 2014 National Core Indicators data shows that less than 4.5% of youth aged 18-21 worked in individual jobs. Over a period of 5 years from 2009 to 2014, the lowest rate of employment occurred in 2011 with only 2.4% of youth aged 18-21 employed and the highest rate in that period was in the following year, 2012 when 6.6% were employed.

For older aged youth, 22-30, 2014 NCI data shows better outcomes with 9.1% of youth working in individual jobs. For states participating in the NCI, the percent working ranges from a low of 3.4% to 36.3% for individuals with IDD aged 22-30.

These data paint a startling and sober picture. Even though we currently have Employment First initiatives in 46 states, state and federal investment in systems change, such as the Partnerships project, and Department of Justice and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid rulings, we have yet to substantially change the landscape of employment.

Recommendations

The committee has received substantial input about the nature of effective transition experiences and supports, and in particular the employment and pre-employment experiences young adults receive before school exit. These recommendations focus on systems level expectations and investments. The work of the Partnerships in Employment Projects demonstrate that changing employment outcomes will not occur as a result of isolated or single changes in policy or strategy. The emphasis on employment as a priority needs to permeate the practices and culture of our systems, and change needs to be addressed in each element including leadership investments, operating policies, funding, capacity building, service innovation, performance measurement, and interagency partnerships.

Achieving a consistent focus begins with being clear about the goal and establishing accountability. We support recommendations in the interim report that address performance measurement, and in particular recommendation #27 on page 47 that states, “each federal agency that funds CIE should require that states collect outcome data at the state, local, and agency/provider level.” Specifically, we recommend that IDEA Indicator 14 be strengthened by separating reporting on postsecondary education and employment, requiring simple but specific data on type of employment, hours worked, and wages, and mandating that data be collected annually for all graduates. LEA’s should be developing improvement plans for lower performing schools and SEA’s should be establishing policies for technical assistance to these schools. Consistent with implementation and monitoring of state performance under the Community Rule, CMS

should require that states report annually on the employment status of each individual supported under a Medicaid Waiver.

The Interim Report on Transition speaks to the necessity for interagency collaboration to achieve transition outcomes. From the Partnerships experience, we know that interagency collaboration is fostered when a specified entity has responsibility for facilitating the collaborative process. We recommend that any federal systems change funding initiative require that applicants include funding for a “backbone organization” that convenes and manages the initiative, and that participating organizations establish a memorandum of understanding prior to application. Ideally the backbone entity should be one that does not have responsibility for setting state policy. A neutral organization can assure that deliberations are unbiased and goal oriented. Such an organization can facilitate the relationship building and sharing of information that is needed to build a results- oriented collaboration.

Interagency collaboration takes significant investment, but can have substantial payoff. Consistent with WIOA, the Committee should specify that mandated MOUs incorporate clear outcomes and accountability structures, and Committee recommendations should simplify and target federal agency accountability for implementation. Finally, federal agencies need to provide clear and simple guidance about long term issues that influence collaboration including payer of last resort, presumed eligibility as individuals move between federal funding streams, and clarification of the relationship between state Common Core standards and pre-employment experiences to remove barriers and streamline the employment process.

Capacity building continues to be a high needs area. There is not a consistent national approach to provider qualification standards and to supporting an infrastructure for training and technical assistance. We recommend that each federal agency that funds CIE, including CMS, VR, Education, and Labor, establish clear model standards for provider qualification and establish clear guidance that permits reimbursement under federal financial participation for capacity building investments. The outcome should be that state systems engaging in systems change give priority to ensuring that qualified personnel are in place to provide educational and employment supports and services. We concur with the Interim Report that pre-service programs for teachers should include comprehensive coursework on transition and college to career readiness, inclusive education and universal design for learning strategies within the expectations of a highly qualified special education teacher. We also recommend that case managers in DD agencies receive training in supported and customized employment necessary for their role in service planning. We recommend that states look to credentialing or certification of professionals providing direct support and employment services that include coaching and assessment of the implementation of core competencies. Both state and federal governments should give priority to investing in the preparation and career development of professionals across education, vocational rehabilitation and developmental disabilities. In addition to task specific training and technical assistance,

a funding investment should be made for leadership and management staff development to assure that the entities that have responsibility for carrying out policies have the skills and abilities to do so.

We appreciate having the opportunity to speak before this committee and we believe that the Partnerships in Employment projects reinforce the recommendations put forth by the Transition Committee while adding other thoughts that may not have been considered thus far. Thank you.

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